BLACK WOLF GUARDIANS:

THE PLAINS OF AREFELL

MATTHEW GORDON MACNEIL

Black Wolf Guardians: The Plains Of Arefell

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

Chapter 1

BANG BANG BANG BANG!

That's all he heard day in and day out, the hammer striking metal to form blades and other instruments, and his

grandfather's gruff cough as smoke covered him.

He thought he would be used to it by now but how could you get used to hearing that everyday and some of the night? Wes Rendorn, his grandfather, was Aelyn's only blacksmith which meant great business for the family but also the constant racket and unending work load.

"Better to be a workin' man than a beggar."

His grandpa always said and while true, Leo wished he could at least get a decent night's sleep sometime.

He lie awake now, listening to the pounding of hammer on anvil and wondering how his grandpa, a man nearing his eighties, could continue to put in so many hours into such a back breaking job.

To feed them, yes, he knew that, but it wasn't just that. Wes Rendorn loved what he did, saw it as an art form that no other even compared to, and always praised the artistry of the blacksmiths in the capital city every time they visited, taking pride in their craftsmanship even if it wasn't his own.

And Leo admired that about his grandpa, he had been his hero since he was a little boy, but he hated the idea of being a blacksmith himself. It wasn't his calling in life, he knew that.

Despite that he helped in the shop anytime he was needed, seeing it as a way to repay his grandfather back for looking

after him since his parents died.

"He's probably making sure everything's in order for the Festival of Dara tomorrow."

Leo thought out loud as he wrapped his blankets around himself better.

"The King did commission a lot of weapons."

King Erran had sent a messenger to Aelyn personally asking Wes to forge one hundred swords for his bodyguards, the Black Wolf Guardians, giving him three weeks to finish the task.

Why the King chose him wasn't known but the older man didn't care in the least, jumping on the opportunity to both serve his sovereign and to prove that a countryside blacksmith could be just as skilled and effective as any city dweller.

In the early morning the two of them would need to get up and set up shop, having the swords ready for the King's entourage as the Festival of Dara, the annual celebration of Elgade's foundation, was being held in Aelyn this year. It was customary to have every regional town host it and this year was Aelyn's turn.

As far as Leo knew this had never happened before in the Festival's three hundred year existence. It had gotten close like when he was a boy and the neighbouring village of

Suddon was chosen or as an early teen when another nearby town, Brogan, was picked, but it never came to Aelyn before and so everyone in town was excited. Both for the historic value and for the stream of cash that would come with the hundreds of 'tourists' as grandfather called them.

It wasn't a religious festival per se but Dara, the Goddess of Family and Friendship, was honoured in it due to the legend that she guided the three brothers Brendel, Castor, and Argo in defeating the High Elves of Moran during the war of independence.

Erran and his family, the House of Dirmonni, was descended from Brendel Dirmonni who became King of Elgade upon winning the land's freedom from the Elves. The Dirmonni family was, originally, an Elven Clan but Brendel's mother, Classia, married a human man named Drex who took her family name as he didn't have one, and the brothers were brought up in human society, growing attached to it and loathing how the Elven Lords treated them and others like them as half breed mutts.

Three hundred years later not much remained of the Dirmonni's Elven heritage save for, on occasion, the gene that produced pointed ears, slanted eyebrows and vertical, cat like eyes.

Both Erran and his daughter and heir Rowena inherited it,

passing as Elves in every sense of the word.

A small part of Leo looked forward to seeing the Princess. Rumours said she was beautiful and, as much as he pretended he wasn't like his friends who adored attractive women, he wouldn't mind staring a bit if he could get away with it.

BANG BANG BANG BANG.

The hammer finally stopped after the last strike and Leo could hear his grandfather shutting down for the night. Looking out his bedroom window he saw the elderly man locking up the shop door with his lock and walking towards the house.

Well built, strong, Wesley Rendorn wasn't the typical image of a grandfather, but he doted on his grandson all the same like any decent grandparent would.

Spotting Leo looking he gave a wave and a wink before disappearing onto the porch and into the house.

Leo smiled and curled up under the covers again.

Tomorrow would be a great day.

"You gonna sleep all day boy?"

His grandfather's voice cut into his sleep, plucking him out of a nice dream.

"I was planning to sleep till daylight today."

Leo said back eyes still closed.

"No time for that. We needa get things ready for later. C'mon. I promise if ya help me now you can take tonight off and I'll give ya a sleepin' in day tomorrow."

His bedroom door closed and Leo sat up, rubbing the crust and gunk out of his eyes before letting out a long sigh.

So much of sleeping.

He rolled off the bed, pulled open his drawers and changed into a pair of trousers and a black tunic, its woolen sleeves (hopefully) enough to keep him warm in the cool morning air.

There would be no time for breakfast so he didn't even stop in the kitchen, he just grabbed his gloves and headed out into the work shop.

The air, chill and bitter, snapped at his skin as he walked from the house towards the smithy, the old building nearing its fortieth year of operation. The rest of Aelyn, save for a few of their neighbours, was still asleep. Most wouldn't wake for another two hours or more.

Opening the door the hot air smacked Leo in the face immediately, both giving him relief from the cold and making him wish he could be back in bed.

"'Bout time."

His grandfather said covering some swords with cloth.

"Get your butt over here and help me set up."

"Yessir."

It took them an hour to prepare everything. Wrapping swords up in cloth, setting up the table, and making sure they found the perfect spot outside Aelyn's market place where the King and his men were bound to see them.

Erran knew what his grandfather looked like, the two having met on other occassions at Blacksmithing contests in the capital, but Wes didn't want to take chances and so situated himself in plain view.

By the third hour people began appearing more and more, all dressed in their best clothing. Kids played with each other as their parents set up stalls or chairs. Mikko, the tavern owner, sat up a stall on the opposite side of the Rendorns, selling fresh food. He offered Leo a hot dog but he turned it down, knowing how the grease would make his stomach.

"You'll be wantin' one later."

He flashed a grin, wiggling one on a fork,

"I'll make sure to save ya one."

"Thank you."

Leo nodded back. It was probably true he'd want one before the day was out but right now? Nope. Not if he wanted to be able to stay on his feet and not feel like his stomach was being torn apart along with his intestines.

His grandfather laid each sword out neatly, making sure even the cloth they lie on was made of beautiful colours to catch his intended patron's eye.

"Do you think the King will come here first?"

Leo asked while checking a table leg, making sure it was sturdy.

"He should. He knows I have his order ready. I sent a letter to him a week ago."

"If not we could always go to the mayor's house after. I'm sure the King and his daughter will stay there for the night. Its the nicest house in Aelyn."

Wes's wrinkled hand squeezed his grandson's shoulder,

"I remember your father at your age,"

His grandfather said suddenly,

"You remind me a lot of him."

"Thanks grandpa."

"Do you know why I said that?"

Leo shook his head. He had no clue.

"Because Xavier would have suggested the same thing. Always full of simple, straightforward answers."

Leo couldn't help but smile. He barely remembered his father save for one brief memory of him playing with his toes as a baby, but he was always happy when he was compared to him as he was, by all accounts, a good man.

Two hours later the royal party arrived, announced by a trumpet player wearing golden robes, a feather in his cap.

The Black Wolves, clad in steel silver plate armour, faces covered in helmets, marched side by side as the King's carriage came behind at a leisurely pace.

Behind them came regular Knights, all sons of noblemen save for a few exceptions who proved themselves on the field or in service to the King and were granted Knighthoods by him.

The King's carriage slowed as it past the Rendorns' table, Erran peeking out to look at them.

"Good day sir blacksmith,"

He said cheerfully, his black facial hair almost covering his grin,

"I see you did a fine job on the weapons."

"Yes, My Lord."

Wes bowed,

"I created the best swords for you and your army."

The King gestured to be handed one and Leo quickly obliged, giving him one with a red diamond on the pommel. Erran swung it gently back and forth, nodding in satisfaction.

"My men will be back later to collect."

Erran smiled pulling the sword into the carriage.

"Yes My Lord. We will be here."

"And I will make sure Rowena pays you personally,"

The King continued,

"I'm trying to get her out to meet the people more. She's a shut in, always has her nose in a book."

He glanced over to his side and laughed, Leo catching a glimpse of hazel coloured hair whipping.

"Enjoy the festival!"

Then, just as quickly as it came, the King's carriage was gone down the road, followed by Knights and footsoldiers.

Wes smiled at Leo and pulled out a bag of coins, tossing then

to him.

"Go enjoy yourself. I'll handle things from here."

"Are you sure grandpa? I can stay. I---"

"No no. Go on Leo. I've been setting up stalls in the festival for years boy. I know what I'm doin'."

"OK. I'll see you later."

Leaving his grandfather behind Leo went in search for his friend Van Desmond to see if he wanted to go bobbing for apples or try to win the strongest man contest.

He was just past the stalls when the explosion knocked him off his feet and sent him crashing into a house.

Chapter 2

It was the screams that roused him from unconsciousness. Opening his eyes slowly he had trouble focusing, blurry images running all around, orange shapes rising into the air.

Rubbing his eyes to clear them Leo refocused and what he saw nearly stopped his heart.

In the middle of the town Elves were slaughtering Aelyn's people, their swords and muskets cutting down any who tried to flee or the wounded to badly hurt to move.

They wore crimson metal suits, marking them as Fianna Tel, the elite troops of the Elven Kingdom.

As a boy he heard stories of them, how they were ruthless killers in service to the Elf King raised from birth to be nothing but soldiers and assassins. Each carefully selected from Fianna Tel families and trained in the Elven capital of Dal-Aashron.

But....why were they here? The humans and Elves were at peace?

'Grandfather.'

Remembering his grandfather was still at their stall Leo struggled to get up, biting his lower lip to ignore the pain surging in his right leg. Pushing himself up he started limping towards the chaos.

"Leo."

He stopped and looked for the voice.

"Over here."

Turning to an old wooden shed by the Carrick house he saw Van Desmond hiding within, the boy visibly terrified.

"Come in here with me."

Leo didn't say a word, couldn't risk it. He waved Van off and continued on, ignoring Desmond's pleas to come back.

As he walked he realized he must've been unconscious for several minutes. The damage was just to much for it to have occurred otherwise. Fianna Tel warriors chased the survivors throughout the village, none seeming to notice him moving.

Reaching the area where the stalls were he stopped.

All of them are gone. A black crater in their place.

A body, that of Mikko, was lying face down with a wound to the head, blood oozing out of it.

He survived the blast but was dispatched by a Fianna Tel, Leo surmised.

His grandfather was nowhere to be seen, the crater located directly where he was standing.

A sickening realization hit him then, one he fought hard to not entertain but soon planted itself deep in his mind.

His grandfather had been obliterated.

And, had his grandfather not given him his bag of coins and told him to go off to have fun he'd....he would be dead too.

"Oh grandpa..."

The words caught in his throat, but there wasn't any time to mourn now, he needed to escape Aelyn before it was too late.

'NO! STAY AWAY!"

Leo turned his attention down the road towards the mayor's house where the screaming was coming from. Smoke was rising from that direction, muskets firing.

"The King."

He said.

But the voice sounded like a woman....

The Princess!

How he knew it was her he couldn't say but he ran down the street, pain suddenly gone in the face of losing the royal family.

His grandfather and much of his village was dead, Elglade was being invaded, and now the royal family was being attacked, if he could do something to save the Princess he would.

Had he stopped and thought about it he would have known he stood little chance against trained soldiers, but he didn't stop or think, he followed his instincts into the fray, pushed on by the losses he suffered.

Reaching the mayor's house, a two storey blue building Leo

saw the carriage on the street, Black Wolf Knights scattered around it, dead or dying.

Hanging out of the carriage window was King Erran.

A knife in his throat.

"Gods preserve us."

Leo whispered moving past the carriage, stopping momentarily to close the King's eyes and draw out the knife.

Not having any other weapon he needed to use it, though what good it would do against a sword or rifle or pistol he didn't know. He just prayed he'd be able to find the Princess before encountering any serious threat.

For a brief moment he thought of retrieving his grandfather's sword in the carriage but decided against it. It would take too much time to open the door, risking alerting the Elves to his presence, so as much as he hated the idea he abandoned it and went inside the mayor's house, front door ajar.

He found no one on the first floor, each room filled with nothing but fancy furniture and items like paintings and fine jewelry belonging to the mayor's wife, Lady Kendra, who, Leo assumed, was among the dead outside.

Moving up the stairs cautiously he heard talking coming from one of the rooms.

Elven speech, sharp and harsh.

The Elven language, called the Eldar Tongue by the old folk, was beautiful, almost like music. Even this harsh exchange sounded musical to Leo.

He pressed himself up against the wall, feeling the coolness run down his back as he edged closer to the doorway.

It was then that he heard whimpering coming from the room. A girl.

The two Elves continued arguing, ignoring her, probably trying to figure out what to do with her Leo figured.

How would he save the Princess? Jumping in would definitely end up with him being killed almost instantly. Hiding and picking them off one at a time seemed the best option but where would he hide?

The answer was nowhere. There wasn't any good spot where he could easily slip out without making noise.

So in the end he settled on a riskier plan that could go either way. Either he would kill the Elves or they'd kill him.

He would wait until they started walking to the door then spring on one, stab him in the throat and before the other could react he'd drive his knife into him.

Composing himself Leo waited and listened, the arguing dying

down. One of the Elves spoke to the Princess gruffly and she stood up.

They headed for the door.

Leo huddled as close to the wall as he could, fingers gripping the hilt of the knife so hard he thought it'd break.

A flash of red is what he saw first, he struck fast, blade ramming into the Elf's neck straight through to his spine.

Leo ripped it free and rushed into the room, shoving the Princess aside he pounced on the Elf behind her, knocking him onto his back. The knife carved into the Elf's face, Leo bringing it down swiftly in a butcher like fashion, until the man's hands stopped flapping around and went still.

Heaving from the exertion he rolled off, face and upper chest covered in blood and sweat. It lasted barely two minutes but felt like hours, his heart beating inside his ears and throat.

He had never been so scared in his life.

Looking to the right of him he saw the Princess curled up next to the door, golden cat like eyes staring back at him.

Putting the knife down Leo held up his hands to her,

"I mean you no harm, your Highness. I came to rescue you."

She stayed silent, wide eyes continuing to stare.

Taking in the bloody scene before him Leo knew they couldn't stay here, they needed to move.

But how to convince her to go with him?

To be Fianna Tel was an honour, a privilege many would kill for, so Severian's father said. The elite troops of the King, soldiers of the highest caliber unequalled in all of the Elven lands. Only the best and noblest of families were chosen to join its ranks.

But, as he stabbed his latest opponent in the chest he felt nothing of that specialness or uniqueness. All he felt was regret and sorrow.

The human village of Aelyn hadn't done a thing to the Elves but the King, a vengeful man who loathed humankind, wanted to teach them a lesson for winning their freedom so long ago under his ancestor's rule.

The attack wasn't one of conquest, the King having no wish to actually rule beings he saw as inferior, but instead he wanted to wound Elglade and knock it off its golden age it was experiencing.

To do that he ordered the Fianna Tel to disguise themselves as human soldiers and unleash a bomb in the middle of the town to create chaos and then, while everyone panicked, to kill as

many commoners as they could and slay the King and his heir.

Such an attack, he reasoned, would cripple Elglade, allow the Elves to become the main power players on the continent, and leave him with no rivals.

Severian looked down at the face of his dying enemy, a boy who ran out of the house next to him in a frantic attack.

"I'm sorry."

He said in the human tongue, bringing his sword up again and decapitating the kid to end his suffering.

In front of him two Fianna Tel were busy ransacking a house, its occupants lying dead across the yard. He watched as they dragged out furniture and kitchen utensils, smashing and destroying them all.

'Superior Race? Hardly.'

He left them to their destruction and went down the street, doing his best to avoid stepping on bodies and blood as he went. Nearly all were human but a rare few were Fianna Tel, killed by the commoners they so arrogantly thought they could murder easily.

He smiled a bit at imagining the shock on those Elves' faces when the humans struck the killing blow.

The screams were dying down now, most of Aelyn's people

either dead, unconscious or far away. Severian made his way across town to meet up with his commanding officer, Lord Gwellim Ness, and leave, there being nothing left to do here.

Lord Ness, a rarity among Elven nobility, did not view humans as inferior or harboured a hatred for them. He had human friends back in Moran and did his best to make sure humans living under Elven rule received equal justice from the King.

That said, he was also a loyal soldier of the Crown and so, when orders came down to attack Aelyn Ness mobilized his men without question and unleashed them on the town without mercy.

Such contradictions in character puzzled Severian, how one could be so humane and honourable in personal dealings, yet in battle become ruthless and cold towards enemies who's only crime was being born into a different race?

Halfway across Aelyn he stopped, something catching his attention out of the corner of his eye.

Two humans, a male and female, ran from one of the buildings. The female wore jewelry, her dress designed carefully and deliberately. She was no commoner. The boy, on the other hand, wore simple clothing, a knife in his hand, covered in blood.

"The Princess!"

Another Fianna Tel soldier shouted coming from the opposite street.

"Kill the Princess!"

The duo paused hearing the order, faces turning to where Severian stood.

He locked eyes with the boy, saw the fear residing in them.

Behind him he heard the soldier running, sword coming out of its sheath.

"Enough."

Severian spun, whipping his weapon out and slashing his fellow Fianna Tel in the face, blade severing both cheeks.

The soldier fell backward dead, Severian standing over him calmly taking in the sight.

Why did he do it? He couldn't say for sure. An impulse took over and he acted on it. Perhaps he was tired of the bloodshed. Perhaps he finally let his hatred of the Fianna Tel take hold. Whatever the case he made the choice and couldn't back away now.

"You,"

He pointed at the boy and Princess,

"Follow me if you want to live."

The boy whispered to the Princess who shook her head vigorously. She didn't want to go.

"Who are you?"

The boy asked, Severian noticed his knife was now placed in a combat position.

"Severian Firna, son of Deion Firna, Prince of Moran and great grandson of King Varin Ballindroch."

Admitting his royal status was his attempt at showing them he meant them no harm as, he reasoned, no one would willingly give away the fact that they were royalty in a situation such as this.

The Princess tugged at the boy's shirt and whispered into his ear.

"Drop your weapon and come here."

He said.

"There's no time. Follow me or don't but we can't stand here any longer."

And then Severian took off, running down a side street heading for the forest outside the village. Looking back he saw the boy and Princess following.

Leo held onto Rowena's hand as they followed Firna into the forest, hopping over fallen branches, rocks, and ducking under trees. There was no time to think about who he was putting his trust into, all that he cared about was getting the Princess to safety.

The nearest fortified town was Dansdrin, an old military outpost dating back to the war of independence and populated by descendants of the outpost's soldiers.

Leo didn't know if they would even let them in with the Elf with them but where else could they turn? It was the best place for safety in this half of the Kingdom unless one wanted to play with fate and take a chance running through the wilderness.

Besides a few isolated shrines dotting the countryside it was completely absent of buildings or people. Those who ventured out there most were religious hermits or priests seeking visions and guidance from their respective deities.

"Where are you taking us?"

Leo asked Firna as he ducked yet another tree branch, its needles digging into his back.

"I have no fixed destination in mind."

"What?"

"We need to get away from the Fianna Tel, where we go isn't important."

"It is when we run out of food or water."

Firna stopped and faced him, the realization dawning on him.

The Elf ran a gloved hand across his mouth.

"The closest settlement?"

"Dansdrin, an old fort turned into a town. Its well protected by its surrounding wall and its people are hardy frontiersmen and women. But...they don't trust Elves."

The Princess was easy enough to get by. Once they seen her clothing and the royal crest on her signet ring they'd understand who she is. But Firna? Even if they didn't kill him outright, they surely wouldn't let him walk into their town.

"If they don't know I'm an Elf then they can't worry can they?"

Leo arched an eyebrow.

"Help me kill a deer. I'll handle the rest."

"Why?"

"You said it is a frontier town and there are humans who live out in nature, making clothing from animal hides yes? If I look the part of a fur trapper, I'll be able to pass unnoticed."

At first Leo was about to shoot down the idea as ridiculous

but he held his tongue, realizing it might just work. The frontier region of Elglade, nicknamed the Forestlands, was rough territory even for such an advanced Kingdom.

Those who lived there survived by farming, fur trapping, and hunting, brushing up against Goblin raiding parties occasionally as the green creatures crawled out of their mountain home across the border in Sennendal.

But there still was one problem. How could they hope to craft clothing so fast?

Firna didn't seem like he was going to give that answer away and Leo didn't have the energy to argue, so taking Rowena's hand he followed the Elf deeper into the forest in search of a deer.

While they hunted his thoughts continued to drift back to Aelyn and his grandfather and those he had known. How could it be that they were dead? He just saw them hours ago laughing and enjoying themselves.

How could they be there one minute and gone the next? It felt surreal, like reality itself was broken.

Death was a part of life, he accepted that and always had but he was a little boy when his parents died, too young to really understand and grasp the situation. This was different. His grandfather raised him, saw him everyday.

Now he'd never see him again.

A strange emptiness entered his throat and extended down to his stomach, leaving him feeling lost and sad. All he wanted to do was turn around, go home, and see his grandfather beating his hammer again.

Closing his eyes Leo composed himself. Losing focus meant possible death for the Princess, his priority now was keeping her safe. He could deal with his grief and anguish later.

And besides, he chided himself silently, his loss compared nothing to hers. She lost her father and possibly her entire Kingdom in one attack. If anyone deserved to feel hurt its Rowena, not him.

Rather than finding a deer straight away like Leo expected, it took the small party an hour to locate one drinking near a stream.

Firna said a blessing for the animal's spirit, thanking them for their sacrifice, and broke their neck with Magic, making a snapping gesture with his hands.

The deer's body went limp and the Elf quickly began casting more spells, a bright yellowish blue hue covered his kill. It transformed the corpse, twisting and morphing it until what lay on the ground wasn't a dead deer but a fur coat complete with a hood and trousers.

Leo and the Princess stared at it slack jawed. They knew Magic could do wonderous things, but this?

"How....what kind of Magic is that?"

Leo asked, edging closer to get a better look at what he was seeing.

Firna picked up the clothing, dusted them off and folded them across his arm, smiling at the humans.

"Its called in our language Tal-Varon. A system of Magic that can morph one kind of object into another. But the energy needed is immense. I won't be able to cast any more spells for a week or more. But desperate times call for desperate measures."

Rowena stared at the clothing, transfixed by what Firna was able to do.

"We should continue on,"

Firna said,

"Staying in the forest at night will put us more at risk."

Leo agreed but Rowena didn't. The Princess pointed out that even if they kept walking they'd still find themselves in the forest at night time as the sun was already beginning to lower.

Night time, she said, wouldn't be so bad if they were

prepared. They needed to create a fire and keep it burning all night to ward of any predators, but, at the same time, they needed to make sure it wasn't visible enough to attract attention.

"Almost impossible,"

Firna said after she was finished speaking.

"Maybe,"

Rowena shrugged,

"But its either that or die and I'm not in favor of having my body rotting here and being ripped apart by wild beasts."

"I know of a spot in these woods,"

Firna said,

"An old trading post my people built before the Elglade war of independence. Its ruined now most likely, but it may be able to give us shelter at least."

They gave him the OK to lead the way and the three continued their wilderness trek, muscles beginning to grow more tired as exhaustion and hunger set in.

The Elven building, called Dalenshal, meaning literally Autumn Elder Wood, was located close to the Sennendal border causing Leo to feel a bit uneasy, knowing how Goblins loved

night raids.

In the last month alone ten raids had taken place across the region, thankfully most were repulsed without huge losses of life, but the terror remained.

Aelyn itself never experienced an attack, but its neighbouring villages did and refugees had come looking for shelter and aid, many staying a year or more, some permanently.

Van Desmond's sister, Dalla, had lived in Sharun, a village close to Aelyn after marriage, until a Goblin raid killed half of its population and left her a widow.

Leo thought of Van and Dalla now, wondering if they survived the Fianna Tel attack and if so, where would they go now? It was pointless to speculate but its all he could do with so much on his mind.

Dalenshal's door knob didn't crumble to dust like Severian joked it would, but it made a long creaking noise as it opened. Inside there was still furniture and plates on the tables, indicating whoever was last here left in a hurry.

"Make yourselves at home."

Severian welcomed them inside, taking special care to lock the door behind them and making sure it stayed locked and difficult to open.

"There should be beds somewhere down the hall. We should all sleep in the same room if we can for greater security. I'll grab a mattress and spread it out on the floor."

As the Elf went into another room Leo watched the Princess as she scanned the building.

"Dusty huh?"

He said.

"Very."

The two had little to say to each other. Rowena hadn't even thanked him yet for saving her, but maybe she thought it was his duty? And therefore he didn't need a thank you.

It was his duty, he believed, but still, some recognition would be nice as well.

"What will you do once we reach Dansdrin?"

Leo dusted off an old chair and eased himself slowly down into it, surprised at how sturdy it was after all these centuries.

"Take my place on the throne and prepare for war."

She said it without hesitation or fear, making it a statement.

"War?"

"The Elven King attacked us, murdered my father,"

The tone she used was cool, nonchalant, but her eyes burned brightly.

"Your Highness,"

Leo cleared his throat,

"War with the Elves may not end in our favor. We just lost our monarch. To dive into a war so suddenly I---

"And what would you know?"

Rowena lashed out at him,

"You are a peasant. Grandson of a blacksmith. Do not try to pretend you know things above your station."

This change of attitude shocked him. He couldn't think of what to say, he simply stared at her in disbelief.

Rowena must have realized how harsh her words came off because she lowered her eyes.

"You didn't deserve that. I...I'm grateful for what you've done for me. My grief and anger got the better of me."

"Is that how you view your subjects?"

"I..."

He stood up, glaring at her,

"Your subjects are not fodder for a war machine. We're not

expendable. You need us just as we need you. Show some respect and care. I may just be a blacksmith's grandson, but my grandpa was a good man who died serving your father."

Leo left her in the main room and headed down the hallway searching for Severian, finding him in the second last room checking drawers.

"Find anything interesting?"

"Besides buttons and string? Not a thing."

He leaned against the doorway.

"Why did you help us?"

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't know?"

"Not really."

Firna's smile was slightly crooked as he slid the drawer closed and moved to collect the mattress on the old bed.

"I was born into the Fianna Tel, as was my father and his father, going back generations. You are brought up to never question your orders. You are taught to always defend the King and carry out his bidding."

Firna lifted the mattress and slung it across his shoulders.

"But I never believed in that. I wasn't suited for the Fianna Tel and the last straw came when we attacked Elglade

unprovoked. I don't expect you to trust me or believe me right now, but I do hope in time you can."

The Elf edged past and Leo was left to contemplate what he said, but, body and mind tired, he didn't waste too much time on it and headed for bed.

That night the three slept in the last bedroom in Dalenshal and despite all the things that happened that day, each fell into a sound sleep.

Chapter 3

Gwellim Ness learned of Severian Firna's betrayal hours after it happened while expecting the body of King Erran. A private named Wyndellis brought the news, his oval face beat red with worry.

It wasn't a total shock, the Lord knew how Firna felt about attacking the innocent civilians of Aelyn and truthfully he couldn't fault him for feeling that way.

Perhaps in another life Ness would have done the same thing.

The Lord turned away from the royal's body and looked

Wyndellis straight in the eyes,

"Where did he go?"

"....Reports say in the forest my Lord."

"The forest? Are you sure?"

He nodded, face never losing its rosy colour.

"We can't be concerned with a run away, especially now with the attack we just pulled off. The humans will get him in time, either them or Goblins. Report back to your officer soldier, thank you---

"Lord, that's not all!"

Ness looked down at the younger man wondering why he'd held back information.

"Well?"

"Prince Severian was seen with two humans Lord. One wearing fine clothing and jewelry!"

"Did she appear Elven?"

"Yes Lord."

"Find Arwyn and Morrgan and bring them to me."

Wyndellis bowed and ran off, quickly disappearing from view.

If Firna escaped with the Princesss of Elglade then it wasn't

just a simple matter of desertion. He was committing high treason against the King for helping an enemy of Moran escape.

Ness hated the implications of that, what it meant, but what else could he do? He was a loyal soldier, from a family of distinguished officers going back eight hundred years. Turning a blind eye now meant possibly ruining his career, if not worse.

Five minutes later Arwyn and Morrgan found him, the two kneeling. He quickly raised them up again.

"Lord Ness, you've called for us?"

Arwyn asked, her voice soft and delicate matching her looks. Beautiful with silver hair and grey eyes, she was anything but delicate and any man who made the mistake of believing she was paid the price.

Morrgan, her cousin and sidekick, possessed the same silver locks but his eyes were pale blue and rather dull looking. Handsome though he may have been, he lacked intelligence or character, his only redeeming qualities his brute strength and pain tolerance.

"I want you two to track someone."

He wasted little time, knowing Severian needed to be found now before he and his friends escaped.

"Who?"

"Severian Firna. He's went AWOL along with the Princess of Elglade and a friend of hers. I want you to find them. Kill the other human and bring me back Severian and Princess Rowena alive."

Morrgan's eyes lit up at the prospect of another kill. Arwyn sent him off to prepare while she stayed back to ask a question of the Commander.

"How much will this job pay?"

"Your regular salary of course."

"This is extra work Lord,"

She grinned slyly,

"Therefore extra pay."

"How much do you want then?"

"Four hundred extra gold coins each."

"Deal. But you must bring Severian back alive, no 'accidents'."

"Yes Lord."

Arwyn spun around and headed off, her hips swaying as she went. Unlike the rest of the Fianna Tel she didn't wear the typical uniform, preferring to wear trousers and a tunic to allow herself to move more nimbly. Her silver hair held out of

her face by a red bandana.

As he watched her go Ness turned back to the King's body, a sudden wave of regret washing over him.

"Forgive me,"

He said to the corpse,

"I am but a soldier."

Stiff back.

That's what he got for sleeping on the floor.

A stiff back.

Leo gingerly sat up, carefully moving so not to make his pain worse. Firna and the Princess took the beds, leaving him with two blankets and the hard floor.

To be sure, sleeping outside would've been hell, but the floor was a very close second.

Rowena, hair messy, still slept on the bed next to him. Firna was gone, presumably out catching breakfast.

A chill ran through the room and outside the window Leo saw fog swirling around.

"Ugh."

He groaned rubbing his back. Getting up he sat down on Firna's bed and stretched, a hand absently scratching his sideburns.

It took him several minutes to fully remember what happened the day before and how they ended up in this place. His grandfather's death and the death of many in Aelyn.

Strangely he didn't feel the need to cry anymore, his grief manifesting in an empty feeling that consumed him, but no tears would come.

He thought of his grandfather, saying a few prayers to the Gods for him, and thanking his spirit for raising and loving him the way he had.

"I'm sorry."

The words caught Leo off guard and he turned his head to see Firna standing in the door way, the Elf's face looking pained.

"I'm sorry for what happened to your village."

Leo said nothing. What was there to say? He didn't hate Firna, though he didn't like him either. Fate or luck slapped them together and they needed to make the most of it if any of them stood a chance of surviving.

"Did you get any breakfast?"

He asked. The Fianna Tel shook his head.

"Nothing. There's no rabbits or deer around. I'll go see if I can find some berries later."

Leo nodded, hoping he would find something as the first hunger pangs began attacking his stomach.

A few minutes after Rowena stirred and came awake, her golden eyes flashing like a cat's as she went from his face to Firna's.

"Good morning Princess,"

Firna announced smiling,

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes,"

She yawned, stretching,

"Surprisingly well."

Swinging her legs down over the bed Rowena gave a brief nod to Leo who nodded back feeling a bit awkward.

The three discussed plans for the day, Severian suggesting after they eat they head for Dansdrin straight away, worried that they lost time by sleeping, even if it was necessary.

To this Leo and Rowena agreed and the Elf went out in search of berries to make a small meal.

Alone the blacksmith's grandson and the Princess said little.

Passing a few hours like this.

A knock at the door startled them.

"What's that?"

Rowena whispered.

"Not Firna."

Leo said hand gripping his knife.

"Who then?"

He went to reply but another knock, this time sharper, cut him off.

A barrage of kicks started, hammering on the wood.

"Hide!"

Leo ordered her and she slid under the bed, the best hiding spot she could think of.

A loud cracking sound erupted.

The door was down. Footfalls following.

Two Elves showed themselves shortly after. One, a woman in a red bandana, and the other a big man, his dull eyes hungry.

Both carried swords though of different types. The woman's blade curved wickedly at the middle. The big man wielded a regular longsword.

"Hello."

The woman said, friendly and upbeat.

"Its nice to meet you Princess, the bed won't save you."

The woman's smile was genuinely warm, she moved forward but stopped when she noticed Leo standing there, knife out.

"I have orders to kill you."

She told him plainly.

"But if you drop your weapon and leave now I will spare your life.

"What about your orders?"

Leo smirked, not giving either the satisfaction of seeing him scared.

"Simple. I'll tell my Commander you're dead. Now leave. My generosity won't last forever kid."

The woman stepped aside. Gestured with a hand.

Leo looked out at the hall, out to freedom. Then back at Rowena. Her eyes wide with fear.

Taking the Elves on was a death sentence, he knew it, but he couldn't keave the Princess alone.

"Thanks buuuut I'll pass."

He gripped the knife tighter, taking in deep breathes to steady himself. There was no real way to prepare for death, he just hoped it would be quick.

"Ballsy. I'll give you that. He's mine Morrgan. Watch the girl."

She came at him in a flurry of cuts and slashes, moving so fast Leo never saw her. On instinct he rolled and by luck or the grace of the Gods he avoided the blade by a hair, though his pant leg received a cut.

She attacked again, cornering him with her moves.

Head smacking against the wall Leo grunted. He saw the curved blade whip up and come down, delivering a clean cut down the right side of his chest.

Blood sprayed. He watched it pump out with amazement. There was no pain, his brain struggling to register what just happened.

"Leo!"

Rowena's scream caught him off guard. He looked in her direction, tried to speak. Nothing came out.

"You were brave. You can go to your grave proud."

The woman's sword came up in a diagonal strike, cutting his stomach and upper left chest open.

He saw his own innards drop to the floor.

A flash of steel blinded him a second.

A hard force driving him back against the wall again, a heavy object lodged in his chest.

The woman's sword, right in the center.

Leo coughed, bloody spittle sprinkling her blade.

As she withdrew it he collapsed.

"Grab the girl and let's go."

They walked out, Rowena screaming as the Elf named Morrgan hauled her out.

Leo, unable to move, listened as Rowena's voice became faint, then faded altogether.

He closed his eyes, his life almost at an end.

"You sure got your ass handed to you."

Leo's eyes snapped open. A human standing in front of him, someone he'd never seen before.

"And to think, you're Wes Rendorn's grandson. Gods rest his soul."

The man's leather coat wasn't buttoned up, revealing a red tunic underneath and a flintlock pistol. His hands in fingerless

black gloves.

Leo watched the stranger come over and bend down, holding a glove hand out.

"I heard Aelyn was attacked by a survivor. I came as soon as I could. Used a tracking spell to find you."

The man's deep, dark blue eyes scanned Leo's face.

"I'm sorry about your grandfather. He was a good man. If I had known what the Elves were planning...."

He sighed, shaking his head.

"It doesn't matter. Hold still."

A red light burst from his hand, washing over Leo. It was warm, like a blanket wrapped around him, and soon he felt the wounds disappear.

He sat there silent for a few minutes, believing it was all some kind of near death hallucination, but the man didn't vanish as his consciousness faded.

It didn't fade at all.

Leo shot up, taking a large gulp of air.

"Who are you?"

He asked the stranger.

"A friend of your grandfather's. My name's Miles Quinn Prower. Quinn will do."

Prower extended a hand. Leo looked at it warily.

"Do you think I'd heal you if I wanted you dead?"

"You could've just brought me back to torture me for information, then kill me again."

"Torture doesn't work kid. I knew your grandfather. We were friends."

Leo took Quinn's hand and got to his feet, his stomach tender.

"It'll hurt for a bit,"

Quinn explained,

"But within a few days it should be fully recovered."

"How did you know my grandpa?"

"We served together in the Black Wolf Guard."

Leo backed away. He was lying.

"Where are you going?"

"You never knew my grandpa. He was a blacksmith, not a Knight."

"He never told you huh? Just like Wes. Listen, your grandfather served with me for ten years in King Erran's

father's court. Wes was a fine Knight but gave it up when he met your grandmother. And got kicked out."

Leo backed away more. This guy was either a talented liar or a delusional nut. He needed to get away before something bad happened.

"You're too young for Gods' sakes. Look at you. What are you? Twenty six?"

"Twenty seven actually. At least, that's when I stopped ageing."

"Stopped....ageing?"

"Ever hear of Half Bloods?"

"Like half Elves? Yes of course but...."

Leo immediately looked at Quinn's ears. He never noticed before because the tips were barely noticeable but if one looked closely one could see how his ears were pointed slightly.

"Like full blooded Elves, we stop ageing physically for the most part in our twenties, though it varies from person to person. I'm as old as your grandfather was. I just don't look the part."

Quinn walked over to the bed the Princess had been sleeping in and sat down.

"I wasn't lying about your grandfather. He served in the Black Wolves."

"Then why didn't King Erran remember him?"

Leo asked, still not entirely convinced.

"He never acted like he knew my grandfather."

"King Erran was a sheltered child,"

Quinn scratched at his chin,

"Your grandfather served his father at the time of his birth until he was ten. In all that time we may have seen him twice, if that. So it makes sense that Erran never knew who Wes was or his former position in the royal household."

From how he spoke, his body language, and how he looked up at him Leo knew Quinn Prower spoke the truth about his grandfather.

But why did he hide that part of his past? Why didn't he share it?

"He never told me about it."

"There's a reason for that. Your grandfather left the Black Wolves in disgrace. Banished for not following orders."

"What do you mean?"

"In the tenth year of our service your grandfather was ordered

to lead an attack on a city to the east called Cyphorn. Cyphorn's 'crime' was refusing to allow a corrupt official back into the city. The King wanted the city razed and the leaders executed. Wesley would not do it. The King wanted to kill him too, but I stepped in and talked him into stripping him of his Knighthood and banishing him from court."

This revelation nearly blew Leo off his feet. But Rowena's screams came back into his mind and he realized he couldn't delay anymore.

Quinn, seeing this, stood up.

"I'll help you track down the Princess. I know a spell that'll trace their footsteps."

"What about Firna? I can't---"

"Firna's dead."

Quinn frowned.

"Those soldiers went after him first. He fought back and the woman happily decapitated him."

"Why didn't you save him?"

"Because my Magic is limited. I needed to make a choice and I chose you. Come on, we need to find the Princess."

Chapter 4

Leo and Quinn followed the traces of the Elves' footsteps using an illumination spell the Half Elf cast as they left the Elven building. The footsteps led them back through Aelyn and onto the main royal road.

Prower deduced that Ness wanted to take the Princess back to Moran and hold her there as prisoner. Perhaps to ransom her or, he suggested, to make Elglade submit completely to Elven overlordship.

"Nothing would surprise me."

The two followed the road until they came to a roadside Inn and stopped for the night, much to Leo's dismay. But, as Quinn pointed out, they couldn't do much exhausted on their feet.

Getting placed in a top room with a view overlooking the forest Leo and his new companion settled in for the night, neither feeling chatty and so both fell asleep quickly.

The next morning they resumed their journey. Going to the Elven homeland, while rare, wasn't unheard of about humans, so it wouldn't draw much notice if people spotted them

walking Moran's roads.

Finding the Princess would be difficult, Prower warned. He couldn't even promise she would still be alive, something which Leo refused to contemplate.

"She'll be alive."

He said, more to himself than to Prower.

"Maybe, but if she isn't we need to let the royal court know so they can select a new King or Queen from one of the cadet branches of the Dirmonni family."

"Erran's brothers' children you mean?"

"Yes. His younger brother Thomas had five children and two grandchildren. A first cousin, Iain, lives in Eastmount on the southern edge of Elglade. And more distant live scattered across the Kingdom."

"Nice to know the realm doesn't lack heirs."

Leo noticed the forest up ahead becoming thicker, the trees more brown around the bark, leaves greener.

Moran was a Magical place, one of the locations of an Elemental Guardian so the stories said. Fairies of immense power who, long ago, were tasked by the Gods to oversee the natural world and keep Magic in balance.

Whether it was true or not Leo couldn't say, though the Magic in the Elven Kingdom was very much real. Stories of Elven Magic was commonplace among the villages and towns of Elglade, most taking place during the war of independence.

The forest continued to swallow them, Leo becoming more nervous as they went on. Quinn, noticing this, told him he had nothing to worry about.

"Right,"

Leo said,

"I'm walking into a Kingdom who's inhabitants hate me, who've attacked my village and killed half its residence. But yes, I got nothing to worry about."

"Are you always this sarcastic?"

"Only when people say stupid things."

"I meant what I said. Stop worrying and just act casually. If you get too nervous or fearful they'll catch on and then we'll both be in trouble."

Half an hour later they came to the first Elven settlement, a small hamlet surrounded by trees.

"Lwellen's Rest."

Quinn announced as he made his way towards it.

"You've been here before?"

"Many times. Its a nice place, and a lot safer here than out in the wilds of the forest proper. They have well trained guards who are specialized in killing Lashies."

"Lashies?"

Leo never heard of those before and now that he had he didn't like the name. He glanced back out into the forest, the seemingly harmless shadows from before becoming ominous black shapes.

"Lashies are giant bipedal monsters,"

Quinn explained nonchalantly,

"Created from dead trees who's Magic doesn't evaporate entirely upon their deaths, they resemble a tall person with claws and a deer's skeletal head. Antlers and all."

"Have you ever encountered one?"

They made their way into the village, no one out and about, and headed towards the far end where a tavern sat.

"Long ago as a boy. My mother and father and I were traveling these forests returning to Elglade with a party of other Elves. One night as we camped near a river a giant creature emerged on the other side. It was a Lashie. It studied us as it drank from the water, but never made a move to

attack. After it was done, it melted back into the trees."

Leo felt his heart racing. As he opened the tavern door he fought the urge to look one more time at the surrounding forest. It would do no good.

The strong scent of alcohol smacked him in the face as he entered, followed by bellows of laughter by a dozen different voices.

Leo blinked, taking in the place.

Brown wooden floors and walls. Ten tables scattered around the downstairs hall, men and women hung over them enjoying a drink or two. Eyes, as always happens when strangers enter a town, found them, neither hostile or friendly, but curious.

"Find a table. We'll eat first then sleep."

Prower headed for the bartender and Leo looked for a free seat, finding one near the back.

Next to one big brute of a man, half his right ear missing.

"Of course."

Leo cautiously made his way over to the table, doing his best to ignore the glances the big Elf threw his way.

Slipping in on the side he waited for Quinn.

"Not every day we get a human here."

The big Elf said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

"Just passing through."

"Figured as much son."

Leo smiled faintly at the man who returned it and it was then that he realized how old the man actually was.

Elves aged differently, he knew that, and only those advanced in years would begin to show their age, and this man looked like an elderly human.

"Does the face frighten you?"

He grinned sipping on his mug.

"I am an old one."

"I've just never met an Elf who was elderly sir."

"Sir? No need for pleasantries lad. I'm no Lord. Call me Baglen. Baglen Corwen is my name."

At his side Leo noticed a pistol and dagger, both made of good material.

"These?"

Corwen gestured at his weapons,

"Earned them as a bounty hunter in Erl-Shanna back in my

young days. Kept them up by Magic."

"Erl-Shanna? Where's that?"

He didn't know why he was drawn to talking with the man. The two were as different as a dog and a crawfish, but something about Corwen interested him.

"Across the Parthian sea, on Wuhan."

The continent of Wuhan, to the East, was just beginning to be traveled and explored by those in the West. Leo heard of great Empires and Kingdoms there, of beautiful women and ancient Gods.

"You've been to Wuhan?"

"I have. The Elves have travelled farther than man has son. A wonderous continent."

Prower finished talking to the tavern owner and came over to where Leo sat, easing himself into the seat beside him, nodding at Corwen.

"I was just telling your friend here,"

Baglen said,

"About the eastern continent."

"That right? You've been there?"

"In my younger days."

"What about now Enshal?"

Leo looked at Prower, wondering why he never realized the man could speak the Elven language.

Enshal in the Elven tongue meant 'elder', that much he knew.

Corwen sipped more of his beverage.

"Now I work as Hagen's tavern guard."

He pointed at the bartender, a skinny Elf with red hair and a hawk like nose. Hagen glanced their way, smiled and went back to serving a woman.

"He's my niece's son. A good lad if a bit slow."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Three years. I also do farm work here and there down in Grenoch."

Grenoch, Prower explained briefly to Leo, was a village in the plains of Arefell. One reached it after leaving the forest of the borderlands.

Arefell was a large stretch of grassland that compassed miles and miles, villages scattered throughout it. The only city in Arefell was Alma-Torran, ruled over by a cadet branch of the royal family. This branch, Prower said, was descended from the current King's sixth great grandfather.

"So they'll never see the throne again."

He chuckled.

"Unless they stage a coup at some point."

Corwen chimed in.

Leo looked at both men in turn, wondering how asking the elderly Elf about Wuhan turned into this.

"How would you like to make some more coin?"

Prower asked suddenly, grinning at Baglen.

"I'd like that. But how?"

"Become our bodyguard as we pass through Moran. We're on our way to the capital but we need protection."

The offer caught Leo off guard and seemed to do the same to Baglen, who looked at the half Elf blankly.

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You're experienced. Built well. And you've treated a human with kindness when most Elves would either be hostile or indifferent."

"Humans have always treated me well,"

Baglen said, giving Leo a brief smile,

"So why would I hate them?"

"Will you do it?"

"I'll need to ask Hagen if he can spare me,"

The older man said finishing off his drink,

"If I can I'lll accompany you."

"Excellent."

Leo watched Corwen go to the front of the tavern and discuss things with his great nephew. Hagen nodded, said a few words and then the old man came back.

"He agreed to give me two months leave."

"Two months should be enough."

Quinn assured the man.

But Leo wondered if two months, considering all they planned to do, would be enough time. He didn't bother saying it, he downed his worries in the drink a serving girl gave him a minute later.

They didn't bind her hands or feet like she suspected, trusting that they would be able to restrain her by their strength alone.

The bigger one, Morrgan, carried her much of the time slung across his shoulder. Other times he allowed her to walk close

beside him. Neither was pleasant.

His partner, the woman who killed Leo, walked ahead, always alert with a hand never far from her sword.

Rowena fought the urge to ask them what they planned to do with her, not sure if she wanted to know. A fear she thought about was they'd take her to the Elven King and he would execute her publicly, to show the humans what he was capable of.

Her father was dead. The Black Wolf Guardians destroyed or severely reduced in numbers. Elglade's future rested on her survival and right now it looked as if she'd be dragged into enemy territory and never heard from again.

The Princess glanced at their surroundings, dark forest thick with trees. Birds and other animals could be heard but not seen. She wondered briefly of the tales of the Lashies and the Skinwalkers were true.

"Ness better pay up."

The one named Morrgan growled, his voice monotoned and rough.

"I'm sure he will."

Arwyn assured him stepping over a fallen tree.

"If he doesn't the King will. We practically handed him the

human Kingdom on a silver platter without a war. We'll be heroes."

"My people are not so easily cowed."

"Oh really?"

The back of the red bandana whipped as the Elven woman turned around, a sly smile on her face.

"Humans seem to bow to whatever force is greater then them. I doubt yours would be different."

"My people are tough, hard working."

"Look how easily we slaughtered Aelyn,"

Arwyn stated matter of factly,

"Its people were frontiersmen and women right? The hardiest of Elglade's population and still they fell to our blades without much of a fight. There's no shame in submitting to a stronger power Princess."

"You must forget my ancestors beat you."

It was Rowena's turns to smile, Arwyn grew cold.

"And now their sacrifices were for nothing."

She turned around and continued leading them. Soon they would reach the end of the forest and enter the plains of Arefell, open country where there were few, if any, hiding

places.

If she was going to try and run, now would be the time.

"Don't."

Morrgan suddenly said, a hand gently squeezing her shoulder.

"If you run we have to kill you. You may die anyway, if the King so wills, but you will surely die if you run now."

The big man's warning, delivered not in malice or anger, but softly spoken, surprised her, more so for how gentle it was rather than the death threat attached.

She looked off into the darkness of the forest again.

If she died now Elglade would be left without an heir.

Cursing the Elven King Rowena stayed put, unwilling to risk her life or the life of her Kingdom.

Chapter 5

Leo and his two companions left Lwellen's Rest the next morning just as the sun was cresting the horizon, golden rays bathing the village with sunlight.

Some Elves were up, none looked like a morning person. One man, bags heavy under his eyes, watched Leo as he past, a scowl on his face.

"Good riddance human lover."

The bag eyed Elf spat at Baglen.

"You're always a bundle of joy Rhys,"

The bodyguard laughed,

"Its a conundrum why Karlia left you."

"Damn you, you bastard."

Rhys stormed off and headed into a store, slamming the door behind him.

"You had trouble with him before I take it?"

Quinn asked amused. Baglen chuckled and nodded.

"He's the town mayor's son. Hated me ever since he knew I 'fraternized' with humans as he put it once. Most people in Lwellen's Rest don't hate humans but Rhys is an exception."

No one else gave them trouble as they left the village and hit the dirt path leading to the plains of Arefell. That night the group camped inside a thicket of trees, Corwen entertaining Leo and Quinn by telling stories of his days on Wuhan and guarding his great nephew's tavern.

One story in particular interested Leo more than the rest. Once, Corwen said, he was in a city called Songshan in the Empire of Wu guarding a nobleman who recently received death threats from an unknown person for sleeping with their wife.

Apparently the nobleman slept (or as Corwen corrected, raped) so many commoners' wives that he couldn't remember which one that was. The Elf didn't know the full extent of the man's crimes before signing on but once he learned, he aided the assassin in killing the man instead of guarding him.

"I don't defend criminals."

Corwen fiddled with a piece of wood between his teeth.

"After that I left Wu and headed home. Been working here since."

"What was Wu like?"

Leo asked kicking a stone into the fire.

"Different than here."

"How so?"

"The names for one. Liu Shi. Anshan Qu. Lao Zheng. The culture is also different. In the east, not just in Wu, they place great emphasis on respecting and honouring your elders and parents. Many families live under one roof for several

generations so you have great grandparents, grandparents, parents, and children all living in one home."

"Couldn't imagine."

Prower shook his head sighing.

"I spent my childhood and teenage years traveling. Staying put in one cramped house sounds like a special kind of hell to me."

"If you were raised in the culture you may feel differently."

"True."

No one spoke for a time, then Prower brought up the plains of Arefell and what they should expect.

"Several villages exist there,"

He told Leo,

"But most are spaced out and in between its all grassland, rivers, and a few caves. Wolves, bears, and bandit Clans call those areas home."

"Don't worry son,"

Baglen winked at Leo when he saw him getting anxious,

"I'll do my best to make sure you pass through the plains without issue."

An hour later found them all asleep, Leo drifting off counting the stars in the sky.

Arefell was exactly how Leo imagined it.

Grass as far as the eye could see, most parts green, others brown or even dead black. Deer and other plains animals like horses could be spotted from time to time as they walked.

The villages, like Prower said, were spaced out, not many people living in them. Most were farmers, one or two storekeepers and tavern owners. Some showed them kindness, but in the main the Arefell people were indifferent to them.

Two days into Arefell they came upon the village of Karmithren, a mixed ethnic community made up of Elves, Dwarves, and, surprisingly to Leo, humans.

The harshness of the plains, Quinn explained to his baffled young friend as the three reached Karmithren's walls, brought people together by necessity. Whatever racial animosity, rivalries, and blood feuds one has is put on the back burner in Arefell. The most important thing was survival.

Most of the residents of Arefell came from ancient families hailing back before the founding of the Elven Kingdom. None were what one would consider 'noble' in the traditional sense,

but each village had its Chieftain or Chieftess who governed according to Moran's laws. The Chieftain who held the most power in Arefell, Quinn told him, was Samos Silveren, Chieftain of Raven's Point, one of the few cities in the plains.

Crossing him meant death.

"Halt!"

One of the guards along the walls shouted, a spear pointing at Prower.

"State your business."

"Just passing through."

Quinn said.

"On our way to the capital."

"Why?"

"Private affair."

"Either tell me or you ain't getting in."

Quinn shared a look with Corwen, the older man not liking the idea of sharing anything with a random wall guard who looked like he just got out of school.

"Listen,"

Corwen shouted up,

"Just let us through. We'll be here a night and then be on our way by morning."

"Wait here."

The guard slipped from view and was gone five minutes, returning with a tall, elegantly dressed man who's dark blue eyes seemed to lock immediately on Leo.

"Captain Crispin Odeon."

The guard saluted the Captain and walked off down the ramparts, Odeon glancing from one man to the other.

"Two Elves, or rather an Elf and Half Elf, with a human. A strange combination."

"Karmithren is multiracial,"

Leo pointed out,

"Is it really so strange?"

"Karmithren is different than the outside world boy,"

Odeon stated harshly,

"What happens inside our walls is separate. Dash said you were looking to spend the night here? Is that so?"

"Yes Captain."

"Would you be willing to hand your weapons over upon

entry? They will be returned to you when you leave."

"Why do we need to give them up?"

Quinn asked this, hating the idea.

"The Chieftain's grandfather decreed it sixty years ago. All people within Karmithren, whether native born or visitor, must relinquish all weapons to the guard til they leave the settlement."

Having no other option, unless they wanted to sleep out on the grass, the trio agreed to the terms and stripped off their weapons.

Dash came out minutes later to collect them, letting each know they'd get them when they left, and then he ushered them inside.

Karmithren, surrounded by a high wooden wall, gave off the feel of a fortress town without the fortress, unless one counted the Chieftain's Great Hall in the middle of the settlement. Each house, made of stone, was built to withstand most things, from the elements to an attack. Forty in all, none stood out as unique, all made in the same bland style.

Practically took precedence over artistic expression.

"Where's the local Inn?"

Quinn questioned Dash, the younger man pointing off down a

side street towards a barn like structure.

"Its run by a Halfling. Chatty fella but good hearted. Should be able to find a room there."

They separated from the guard and headed down the side street to the Inn, noticing its big wooden sign that read 'Sunmorning Inn.' A chubby male Halfling sitting watching a sunset below the letters.

"Homey place."

Corwen commented. Leo studied the Inn over and wondered what the man could possibly be thinking. It wasn't the worst place to rest your head but homey? His grandfather's shop was more welcoming than this.

The thought of Wes sent a sting of sadness through Leo but he brushed it off. There would be time to grieve properly later.

A wave of warmth struck Leo in the face as he entered the Inn, a roaring fire at the far right corner being the cause. Outside it was a bit chilly, but inside it was hot, nearly too hot.

At the front desk a chubby Halfling with sandy hair was hunched over reading ledgers. Glassy eyes glanced up as they approached, neutral expression changing to one of excitement.

"Hello!"

The Halfling slapped the book shut and slid it across the counter where it almost knocked off mugs.

"Welcome to the Sunmorning Inn! I'm Giles Meehen, owner and proprietor."

"Well met."

Corwen grasped Giles' meaty hand in his. Quinn and Leo made no move to follow his example.

"Do you require rooms?"

Meehen asked quickly.

"How about food? We serve the best potatoes and venison steak this side of Raven's Point."

Considering there wasn't much between Karmithren and Raven's Point his boast made little sense to anyone but himself.

"Three rooms and supper."

Quinn reached into his coat pocket and flipped down four silver coins to cover the cost.

"We'll be out of your hair by morning."

"Ah, no trouble at all! If you need anything further don't hesitate in letting me or my son Peragrine know. He's outside the settlement right now collecting fire wood but should be

back within two hours. Let me show you to your rooms."

The fire warmed her forearms and legs but she wouldn't let herself get to comfortable, at any time she could be killed or beaten and wanted to be ready.

Morrgan sat across the fire from her ripping apart a piece of rabbit he cooked over the flames. Arwyn was off by herself doing the Gods knew what. She never said and her companion never bothered asking.

As she passed the female Elf gave the Princess a mocking smile. It took everything Rowena had not to punch the bitch there and then.

Now sitting with Morrgan was starting to get boring and she found her mind wandering to better days, back when she was a child.

But these pleasant thoughts were cut down when a loud piercing cry echoed, sounding like an unnatural voice belonging to an unknown animal.

Morrgan, usually stoic, glanced up cautiously, a greasy hand reaching for his dagger.

"What's that?"

Rowena asked, voice almost squeaking.

"Dunno. Could be a Skinwalker. A Draugr. Anything."

A Draugr? How? They were supposed to be the restless undead in burial tombs and mounds, not in the middle of an open plain.

Morrgan, seeing her confusion, rubbed his eyes.

"The plains are filled with ancient burial sites,"

He said gesturing with a hand,

"Ancient Elven mounds. Some never found rest. Could be what that is."

"What do we do if it is?"

"Hope we don't die."

Dragur were known to be vicious beasts. Ripping their victims limb from limb indiscriminately, caring only for the meat within.

In the darkness around the camp nothing could be seen, giving whatever that was a cloak of semi invisibility.

"Don't stray from the fire."

Morrgan advised her.

"Draugr and Skinwalkers hate the light. I collected enough wood to keep it going in case this happened. Lets just hope the Gods don't decide to send rain."

He stood up then and moved around the fire, seating himself beside her.

"I'll protect you."

He said without looking at her, crossing his arms.

"You'll protect me?"

Rowena asked it in a mocking tone. Morrgan smirked.

"I get it. I do. But for tonight I'm the only protection you got Princess."

As much as she hated the thought Rowena knew she needed to put her trust in Morrgan. At the very least he wouldn't let anything happen to her if he could help it since it would ruin any chance of a good reward.

The Elf pulled out his blade, placing it on his lap.

"Get some rest now."

He commanded.

"I'll keep watch till Arwyn gets back."

"Where is she?"

"My sister likes to hunt."

Is all he said. Knowing she wouldn't get any more from him, Rowena laid down and did her best to fall asleep.

The morning light poured into Leo's room, stirring him awake with a grunt.

"Who pulled the curtains?"

He grumbled, a hand rubbing at his eyes.

"Its time to get up."

Quinn replied. Leo listened to him walk around the room, more light coming in as he opened more curtains.

"Ugh."

"Ugh nothing. We need to move."

"Did you wake Baglen?"

"He's already downstairs eating breakfast. The man's an early riser by nature."

"Gods love him."

Throwing the sheets off him Leo got up, went into the bathroom and washed his face in the washing pan Meehan left them, before changing into a new pair of black trousers and a white cotton shirt.

Coming back out he watched Quinn throw on a red jacket, the Half Elf grinning at him.

"You ready to leave?"

"Can we eat first?"

"Sure. But nothing to expensive alright? I only got a few coins."

The two men headed downstairs, finding the elderly Elf stuck beside the fire forking down the last of his scrambled eggs and ham. He waved when he saw them.

"Finally awake are you Leo?"

Corwen laughed.

"Its still early."

Leo muttered, sitting down across from him.

"This is nothing,"

Corwen said,

"When I was your age my pa used to get me up at two each day to help on the farm. This is nothing compared to that."

"If you can choose what time to get up now, why so early?"

"Course of habit maybe? Either that or I prefer early mornings. The day goes fast enough as it is and I'm not getting much younger."

Meehan poked his head up over the Inn's main desk, spotted

Leo and Prower with their bodyguard, and quickly ran over, nearly tripping over himself as he did so.

"Morning!"

He beamed, face rose red.

"Sleep good?"

Both nodded.

"Would you like some breakfast? Sausage, eggs, and toast are the the special today."

"I'll have the eggs and toast."

Leo said, not trusting himself with the sausage. Certain things he found difficult to swallow and they were one of them, so it was better not to risk it.

"Coming right up! And you, Mr. Prower?"

"Some eggs would be good, thank you."

The Halfling did a small bow, smiled again, and rushed off to prepare their food.

Other patrons in the Inn, preoccupied with their own affairs, paid little attention to the outsiders near the fire. The few that did gave only a casual glance before returning to their friends or families.

Which suited Leo just as well. He didn't need anyone asking

questions as to their purpose or where they came from. He just wanted to eat and get on the road again and find Rowena.

Within twenty minutes they had their food and were finished, paying the Innkeeper, thanking him for his hospitality and leaving.

They stopped by the barracks to collect their weapons and then left Karmithren, heading out into the plains again to begin another day of travel.

Like the rest, this one past uneventful, that is until it neared evening and they reached a small stream.

Here they stumbled upon a bandit attack....or rather, the aftermath of one.

A family of six, a mother and father and their children, had been butchered in their beds and their belongings taken. What was deemed of no value being scattered across the grass.

Corwen and Prower, used to this brutality, stepped over the bodies carefully, respectfully, but did not stop.

Leo did. His eyes moving from one face to another, the contents of his breakfast beginning to churn in his stomach.

"Oh..."

Putting a hand to his mouth he swallowed hard and took a breath, but couldn't hold it.

A spew of egg and toast sprayed onto the grass.

"It'll be alright lad."

Corwen went over and patted him on the back.

"You'll be fine."

"Why....why would anyone do this?"

"Why? For fun of course!"

Leo looked up, a female Elf standing across the stream, bandana and clothing streaked with blood.

"Long time no see huh?"

"You...."

The sting of her blade as it stabbed into his chest resurfaced in his mind.

If she was here....that meant....

The Princess was close by!

"No need to lose your food over them,"

She laughed,

"They're just humans."

Quinn and Corwen drew their pistols, Leo continued to stare at the Elf, hands trembling.

"Where's Rowena?"

Leo asked, nearly a whisper at first, then more forceful as he repeated it.

"With my cousin back at camp."

The woman leaped across the stream, her curved sword whipping out in a clean arc as she landed.

She wasted no time, advancing on Prower with astonishing speed, silver blade slashing and ripping in fluid motions.

Quinn was ready, sidestepping and jumping back from each blow, smirking all the way.

"Is that all the army can do?"

He mocked,

"Surely they could hire more capable warriors?"

"I do enjoy a chatty sparring partner,"

The woman flashed a grin, kicking Quinn in the stomach, sending him staggering back.

"Keep it up and I may just make your death quick."

"How...generous of you."

He grunted, spitting out a mouthful of saliva.

Corwen fired, but the shot went wide.

The woman held up a hand.

"Wait your turn Enshal. I'll be along shortly."

She came at Prower again, flipping over his pistol shot and landing behind him, her sword ripping upward, streaks of blood exploding into the air.

"Quinn!"

Leo screamed his name, the Half Elf falling forward onto his knees, hands going for the wound.

The curved blade came down again, aiming for his neck----

Blocked by Corwen's pistol, this time striking the blade out of the woman's hand with expert accuracy, sending it twirling away.

She stared at him dumbfounded a moment. Amazed.

Then she laughed, eyes flaring in some sort of twisted delight.

"Well well! Aren't you a crack shot!"

Reaching into her belt she pulled out a long knife, its hilt decorated with two black diamonds.

"I'll grant your wish. Its your turn now."

The elderly Elf beckoned her forward and as Leo watched the two matched each other step for step, Corwen's grace in movement surprisingly considering his age, her blows could not connect and she grew increasingly frustrated.

"Help me up kid."

Snapping out of watching the two Elves Leo rushed over to Quinn, gripping his arm.

Carefully he helped the man to his feet, drips of blood running down his arms. Leo didn't look, it was better if he did his best to ignore it.

"Nearly had me."

Quinn's laugh was shaky, he did his best to cut through the pain.

"That's the woman who killed me."

Leo said.

"I know. If we can make her tell us where Rowena is, we'll be set."

He shuddered, back arching.

"Quinn."

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

He stood up and gently pushed Leo aside.

"Stay back. Leave this to Baglen and me."

Quinn joined Corwen against their enemy who seemed to get an adrenaline rush from this unexpected turn of events.

Leo grabbed his own knife, unsure what he should do. Quinn said to let them handle her, but how was that going? The two struggled to stay on their toes against her.

"Screw it."

He gritted his teeth, forcing back the memory of his last encounter with her, and charged forward.

Hearing his footsteps Quinn glanced back, shaking his head but Leo kept coming, eyes focused on his murderer.

She beamed and lunged forward, Leo shoved out of the way by Baglen before her blade found his heart again.

"I said stay back!"

Quinn growled.

"I can help you!"

Leo jumped up from the dirt.

"Such fun!"

The female Elf twirled her long knife on her palm.

"The General gave me a special one this time."

"Where's the Princess?"

Leo's fear, still there, was beginning to give way to fury. He was terrified, but his anger remained, and grew stronger with each passing minute.

"I told you, stupid boy,"

She brought her blade up,

"With my cousin at our camp."

"Where?"

"So many questions. All so pointless."

She attacked again, this time the elder Elf wasn't there and her knife sliced into Leo's shoulder, going through it like a soft tenderloin.

He wailed, but fought back, fist smashing into her face. He struck her consecutively, refusing to let her take the offensive, bad though his shoulder wound may have been.

Quinn and Corwen aided by attacking from the flanks, their own knives and firearms working in tantum, each using their pistols as effective melee weapons.

Together the three wore her down, though Corwen took several slashes to his midsection in exchange for his efforts in beating his gun over her head.

Quinn was the one who brought her down, a blast with his Magic striking her straight between the eyes.

The three looked down at her, lathered in sweat and their own bodily fluids.

Leo noted how the blast dented her skull, pushing in her forehead, pieces of white matter and brain sticking out.

"The Princess can't be too far."

Quinn said, scanning the surrounding plains.

"But where do we even start looking?"

Leo asked.

"We just start walking and hope we stumble on something. I doubt that her partner will move on if she doesn't come back. He'll wait another day or so at most. It gives us time."

Prower turned to the elderly Elf and healed his wounds and then Magically sowed up Leo's face and arm.

"You did well,"

He said,

"Your grandfather would've been proud seeing you today."

"Thank you."

"But next time, you need to listen to me. You got lucky. You

might not get that next time."

He nodded wordlessly, but he didn't care.

He made the right choice. He knew it.

They spent the next hour burying the murdered family and salvaging whatever supplies they had.

They left the Fianna Tel woman where she lay.

It took another day before they found the camp site.

Morrgan, the big brute of an Elf, was dead.

Chest and throat torn out in a savage attack done by a beast with claws.

Rowena....she was alive....But scarred.

They found her huddled beneath the dead man's body, as if he purposefully placed her there as he was dying to shield her.

Leo tried speaking with her but she didn't register anything. Not her name, not his name, nothing could get through to her.

Quinn examined her abdomen and head for any injuries. There was none, at least no physical wounds.

His theory, he told Leo, was that some kind of creature, maybe a Lashie or Draugr, came out of the forests and killed

Morrgan before the Princess's eyes.

Morrgan, wanting the reward to the last, did his best to protect her, dying in her defense. Why the thing didn't continue with her he didn't know but said they should be grateful.

And grateful Leo was. He worried they'd lose her to the Elves or worse, and Elglade would be without an heir, but what now? She wasn't capable of speech, let alone government.

The three decided it was best they get the Princess back home and let the nobles deal with what would come. Buying horses in Karmithren they rode back into Elglade, hailed as heroes by all who met them.

Rowena became Queen ten days after returning to Elglade, but whatever happened with Morrgan damaged her mind and she was never the same. She never regained her ability to speak or her mental state beyond the bare necessities of survival.

Due to this a council of Elders was established, led by her cousin Iain, a trusted Knight and a close friend of the Queen who made sure she, and the Kingdom, were in good hands.

Leo, Quinn, and Baglen were rewarded by the Council for their actions by being made Black Wolves, tasked with acting as the

Queen's personal bodyguards.

As for the Elves, their plans of causing chaos in the human Kingdom fell apart and soon the two races signed a peace agreement, Leo among the delegates who helped draft the treaty.